

## Combat veteran Spec. Corye Black:

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*"I'm in the Army to change the world . . ."*

The war in Afghanistan may be a half-a-world away for most Americans, but not for one mom, Dene Black, who has two sons in the Army, one of them on his Second combat tour this time in Afghanistan. Ironically, Black, who is an Information Technology Specialist, works at the government facility that makes the bombs used against the Taliban in Afghanistan--McAlester Army Ammunition Plant.

Spec. Corye Black, Dene's youngest son, was back home in McAlester for some R&R recently and stopped by to thank ammunition plant employees for their life-saving work. He is assigned to the 3rd Squadron, 61st Cavalry Regiment from Ft. Carson, Col. and has spent just over four years in the Army, of which 20 months have been in combat conditions.

Dene's oldest son, Codye, is a staff sergeant in the Army with two tours in Iraq under his belt and is currently at a military school preparing to become a drill sergeant.

Joining the Army in July 2005, Corye's first combat tour was in Baghdad from October 2006 to January 2008. Fourteen months later, May 2009, Corye and his unit was in Afghanistan and how long they'll be there is anyone's guess. In the first two-and-a-half months in Afghanistan Corye lost 25 pounds.

Along with his team, Corye conducts "dismounted" reconnaissance with the mission to figure out what weapons the Taliban have and then destroys them. "And if we don't have the firepower then we call in something that does," he said.

He has a special appreciation for the ammunition plant and the products made here. In one incident, the Taliban had discovered where Corye's scout team was and began dropping mortars on them. Corye was literally left in the dust of a mortar round and couldn't hear a thing as a result of the explosion.

"The only thing that saved me was the fact that I was on the other side of a rock face, opposite of where the mortar landed, about 30 feet away," he recalled.

With ears ringing, Corye and his unit conducted "ass surfing" where they literally slid down the steepest part of the mountain praying that they wouldn't hit anything too big on the way down. Once they hit the trail, they ran six kilometers to their base.

While on the trail, their unit's forward observer called in air support which dropped two 500-pound bombs that silenced the enemy immediately, he said. Those bombs were produced at the ammunition plant in McAlester.

"Since I've been in Afghanistan, we've called in and dropped probably 25 500-pounders and each time it ends the fire fight like that (snaps fingers). To hear that plane come over and then the bombs being dropped, the explosion and then you don't hear a thing (from the enemy) is proof positive of the quality work produced at the plant," he said.

"We definitely appreciate what you guys are doing here. Without those bombs

we couldn't do our mission fully. I definitely want to thank everyone at the plant for their great work," he said.

The Taliban usually attacks his unit at least twice a day "using small arms and mortars, RPG's (rocket propelled grenades) . . . anything they can bring with them," he said. "This is definitely a cat and mouse game. Sometimes we're the mouse, sometimes we're the cat. You just got to be smarter than the other guy."

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are different, Corye explained. "In Iraq you're probably driving a vehicle waiting for an IED (improvised explosive device) to explode. In Afghanistan it could be a mortar, an RPG or anything . . . you hear the bush move and you react," he said.

Corye and his fellow Soldiers constantly clean their weapons to include magazines and even the bullets. "We're cleaning them before a mission, after a mission and even during a mission. We're checking to make sure everything is working properly," he said. The weapon he uses the most is the M4/203 which is a combination of the 40mm grenade launcher and the 5.56 mm rifle.

When a helicopter arrives at their post, they've got to clean their weapons and gear again. "Even after we've watered down the area to help prevent the sand from blowing, no matter what you do, when a helo comes in, sand blows and you clean," he said.

Technology keeps the Taliban from attacking Corye and his unit at night. "Most of the Taliban attacks in Afghanistan are during the day. Probably because we own the night through our night observation devices and night optics capabilities," he explained.

During "down time" Corye and his team mates talk a lot about sports. One team member is from Texas and there are a total of five "Okies," including Corye, so there is friendly OU-Texas college football give and take.

Corye and his "Okie" team members talk about fishing, hunting and what they plan on doing when they get back to Oklahoma.

"You think or do anything to keep your mind off your next mission," he said. "Even when you're not on patrol you're always reminded of being in a combat environment what with the sounds of combat always around you."

The top three most missed items from home are: being able to watch a baseball game on TV; not being able to go outside their "hooch" to throw a football around because it's too dangerous and being able to relax on a couch. The outpost they're staying in has had the same mattress for four years straight.

The "basic necessities" are just that— down right basic--no frills, no Wal-Marts, no convenience stores. This is where mom comes in.

"I make home-made beef jerky, home-made cookies, candy and I send him country lemon aide in the plastic bottles," Dene said. "She has saved me so many times from horrible, horrible nicotine attacks," Corye said of his mom's care packages. Making care packages for her son helps ease her pain because she's sending him something he'll enjoy and share with his fellow Soldiers, she said.

Dene stays busy at home by working in the yard and helping her aging parents. "But no matter what you're doing you think of them. I'll sit down and cry for a while and then feel better. Of course, I always keep a prayer in my

heart for my two sons and all the other men and women in the military,” she said.

Corye’s mom wears an ultra-small prayer box on a petite silver chain which dangles from her neck. Along with the prayer box is a dog tag bearing the image of her two sons in military uniform.

But that isn’t the first dog tag she’s worn. Her first one was hung around her neck in 2005, the year Corye entered the Army, and she wore it until the chain rubbed a hole in the tag all the way through. On the tag is a silver silhouette of an American flag with “Support Our Armed Forces” under it. On the other side is a cross with a prayer that says, “Protect My Son, For This I Pray, Guide Him Safely Home One Day.”

Now she carries the dog tag in her wallet. Corye wears a similar dog tag but his bears a family portrait in color.

His unit is set up on a mountain side somewhere between seven and eight thousand feet high with some mountain peaks towering above them at 15,000 feet, in the most northern part of Afghanistan. Despite living under intense pressure in a combat zone, Corye and his fellow Soldiers have been able to assist the local Afghans to improve their way of life.

“The local villagers wanted us to build them a school, first thing off,” Corye related, “and they wanted medical aid. So we went weekly to the village and provided medical services to everything from birth defects to treating tuberculosis and malaria.”

The school is almost complete where two Afghan teachers will instruct both boys and girls, although in separate rooms. And the local villagers apparently appreciate what the Army is doing to help keep them from being under the tyrannical rule of the Taliban.

The Taliban dammed the only large creek that provided Corye’s unit with drinking and shower water. His unit tried to destroy the dam but kept on getting attacked. The local villagers risked their lives for the Soldiers and took the dam apart, Corye said, because of the good relationship they had established with that village.

After Sept. 11, 2001, there was no question about what Corye was going to do and that was join the Army. “I joined the Army out of a sense of duty. Why not have someone serving in the Army who wants to be there?” he asked.

“I believe we’ve made a great difference in the world since 2001. If you haven’t been to Iraq or Afghanistan where you can see the differences we have made, then you need to go. Sixty million people have been freed in Iraq and Afghanistan. I believe in what we’re doing despite losing a lot of good friends over here,” he said.

“When I come home and see guys I graduated with from high school doing ‘whatever’ I realize how much more I have matured and how much more I have done. I’ve been places and seen things they’ll never see or do,” he said.

What does the future hold for Corye? “If I do get out (in 2013), I want to eventually become a history teacher in high school or college. I’d also like to work my way into politics. I’m in the Army to change the world for the better so I might as well change my country for the better too.”



*Mortar attack—Spec. Corye Black, left, describes a mortar attack that targeted the unit he was with. His mom, Dene, an information technology specialist at the ammunition plant, looks on. (U.S. Army photo by Mark Hughes)*



*High in the mountains—This is an Afghan Army 'outpost' which is around 7,000 feet. Nearby mountains reach 15,000 feet. (contributed photo)*



*Keeping family close—(above) Spec. Corye Black displays a 'dog tag' he wears that shows his immediate family. (right) Dene, Corye's mom, displays an ultra-miniature prayer box she wears on a petite silver chain around her neck. (U.S. Army photo by Mark Hughes)*



*On duty—Spec. Corye Black is photographed while overlooking the Afghan mountainside. (contributed photo)*